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DAMON HILL

A Thesis

Submitted to the Graduate Faculty of the
Louisiana State University and
Agricultural and Mechanical College
in partial fulfillment of the
requirements for the degree of
Master of Fine Art

in

The School of Art

by
Elizabeth Welch
B.F.A., University of Houston Clear Lake, 2012
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ABSTRACT

“Damon Hill” acts as a physical record of the family folklore of a group of people formed by landscape and kinship. As a member of this group, I have translated my family’s stories into a visual narrative as a way to process my own identity in relation to our shared identity. The focus of “Damon Hill” rests primarily on the lives of my female predecessors, as a way for me to contribute their unique voice to the overarching feminine narrative. I incorporate the visual representation of traditionally feminine handicrafts in order to relay their stories through this primary means of creative expression accessible to women throughout history.

INTRODUCTION

“Damon Hill” began with my interest in possessions and the memories they hold, both real and imagined. My interest began to shift in focus from possessions as containers of memory to the memories themselves. This shift in interest coincided with an exploration of different visual means in which to make my work. I began researching artists that worked in a more paired down illustrative manner. I came upon the work of Margaret Kilgallen and Clare Rojas, both of whom pull inspiration from American Folk Art. They have a similarity in aesthetic that references different veins of the genre. Kilgallen pulls primarily from the craftsman’s practice of sign painting while Rojas employs visual formations taken from quilts. Alongside my interest in their artwork, I found their combined history of motherhood and surroundings to be profound. Rojas married Kilgallen’s husband and raised her daughter her death. Rojas found that her artwork was affected by working in the space in which Kilgallen had once created.¹ My interest in the stories of my family and the question of how surroundings can affect our lives led me back to one of the places intrinsic to my existence.

¹ Dana Goodyear, “A Ghost in the Family: Love, death, and renewal in San Francisco,” *The New Yorker*, August 10, 2015, <http://www.newyorker.com/magazine/2015/08/10/a-ghost-in-the-family>.

PART OF A WHOLE

Although we consistently make active decisions that shape our lives, we are influenced in some form by the interactions we have with our families. A large influence in my life was the exchanges I had in my childhood with my mother's side of the family. Their folklore affected how I view and experience the world around me. They provided me with my first experiences of creative expression as well as the many forms that creative expression can take. I listened to them recount personal histories, watched them create with their hands, and inhabited my own special place in their collective union. Although my visits into their world were irregular, I took all that I learned in that space and wore it as badge of belonging.

Once a month my parents would pack me and my brother up and drive us to a halfway point to meet with my grandparents, Sandra and Duane Matula. My grandparents would then load us up in their car and complete the drive to their home in Damon, Texas. Damon is a small town known primarily, if at all, by its location near the comparatively much larger city of West Colombia. Despite its short one hour distance from my hometown, only a few times in my life have I come across people who even knew what Damon was. For those who are aware of its existence, Damon is a small, dilapidated former farming town located on top of a hill. For me, however, the town of Damon encompassed a group of people formed by landscape and kinship. The stories they told gave me my first inkling that life could be different for other people. That my own experience was not absolute and that a group of people could be connected through a shared identity.

My monthly visits to Damon were confusing in some aspects because I often could not separate the sides of the family into distinct units. Everyone seemed to be a large mass of family, inseparable between Matula and Kilsby. My grandmother joked that when she married my

grandfather in 1960 she was told that she was now kin to the entire town. Both my grandfather's and my grandmother's sides of the family were farmers and cotton pickers. At some point almost every member of the family had picked cotton or worked in the local cotton gin. In many ways the town, from its buildings down to its soil, was part of the family. The setting of Damon is integral to nearly every story in my family's repertoire. The town provided a backdrop to their life and its earth furnished theatrical props for their stories as well as situations with which to grapple. They belonged to Damon and Damon was theirs. In her written life story, my great-great grandmother, Rosa Lee Gryder Bennett recorded the foundation of this relationship alongside many other important happenings on a personal and national scale.



Figure 1- Elizabeth Welch, *Rosa Lee Gryder Bennett*, 2016

Rosa's life story begins with her lineage as well as the situations surrounding her birth and concludes in her old age looking at her current concerns. The original document was approximately fifteen handwritten pages that was then passed down to my mother, who typed it when she was twenty years old on her father's typewriter. Rosa's story is the foundation for the body of work presented in my show "Damon Hill" and I wanted there to be a physical presence of her words amongst my visual interpretations of family history. I reproduced the text from my mother's typed record, changing the format of the page and adding illustrations, to create a small book with a wooden cover that aesthetically mimicked my great-great grandmother's character. Throughout the writing Rosa gives a straightforward account of the events of her life, for the most part without sentiment. Throughout her life she continuously observed her surroundings, learned from what she saw, and came to unembroidered conclusions. She documented the struggles of her life, such as childbirth, sickness, crop sizes, and natural disasters, with the strong sense that what happened may have been hard but in the end it was a hardship through which she survived. She began her life as the seventh child in her family but the first to survive past birth, which occurred in a four room log cabin on her father's farm. When she was six years old, she watched her father make the worst decision of his life by selling his farm that was later found to be sitting upon oil deposits. After moving to the Damon area for the first time, she endured the Great Galveston storm of 1900 and saw her family lose their crops, their belongings, and sustain physical injuries. At no point in her writing does she complain about all that occurred. It was simply a fact of her existence.



Figure 2- Elizabeth Welch, *Bennett-Matula Family Quilt*, 2016

A large portion of the artwork of “Damon Hill” is directly based on her writing. In the “Bennett-Matula Family Quilt” series of mixed media paintings on panel, I illustrate several of her accounts. Some of the images are derived solely from her point of view, while others are flavored by accounts from other members of the family. One such instance occurs with the image “The Time When Mon Was Struck by Lightning.” Her telling of the story is a short sentence saying, “Dad got struck by lightning killed 2 mules and a horse.” Later telling’s by my grandfather and other family members creates a livelier story. James Monroe, Rosa’s husband,

was ploughing a field when he noticed an oncoming storm. Mules could only move so fast when ploughing, so while he was slowly trying to escape the storm a bolt of lightning came down and hit him as well as his horse and mules. All of the animals died but James Monroe was saved by the rubber boots on his feet. The lightning caused him to shrink half an inch, quit drinking, and become a better husband.



Figure 3- Elizabeth Welch, *The Time When Mon was Struck by Lightning*, 2016



Figure 4- Elizabeth Welch, *The Birth of Duane According to Mable*, 2016

Rosa's first born, Mabel Ritchie who was primarily known as Aunt Mabel to her family, had a penchant for oral storytelling. The manner in which Aunt Mabel delivered her stories was similar in its straightforwardness and loathe for stupidity to the writing style that her mother employed. Her stories contained moments of personality that flashed by in between descriptions of family illness and natural disaster. They were strong women and their strength is evident in the fortitude of their stories. Everyone always knew where Aunt Mabel stood on certain topics and if someone did not, Aunt Mabel had no trouble letting them know. She was not unkind but when she

felt the need to speak her truth she would. Aunt Mabel's stories were relatable as well as witty and had the added flare of cursing. Aunt Mabel would tell certain stories depending on who was around, as her truths tended to carry barbs and harsh critiques. An illustration of this comes in "The Birth of Duane, According to Mabel." Although I did not hear Aunt Mabel tell the story, I was able to experience it as recounted by my mother's hand. She begins the story with a critique of her brother-in-law

"Back when Jewel was about to have Duane, your daddy, I left the boys with Clyde, because he could be trusted with children, his own children. Your grandpa Harmon, worthless man. Why Jewel ever married him I do not know. I suspect it was because the Matula's were rich. They were rich and Jewel must of thought by marrying the oldest son she would have money too. That did not happen. All they got was forty acres of worthless land, half of which is a bog. Only part of it could be farmed on the days Harmon got his lazy ass outside to farm it."²

Upon arrival to her sister's house she found Harmon sitting idly by while his pregnant wife was doing all of the chores.

"Well, when I got out to the run down shack where Harmon was sitting on his ass not doing a damn thing I saw red. There was my little sister, heavy with child doing everything and I mean everything, even chopping the wood for the wood stove. All Harmon did was sit on his butt and wait to be fed. If Jewel would have done it, he probably would have had her wiping his butt when he took a crap."³

Mabel fortified herself, utilized the bluntness she was famous for, and told her brother-in-law to get up and get to work. Harmon took a moment to weigh his options but soon began working due to the strong possibility that Mabel would hit him upside the head with a frying pan if he refused. My mother told me that Aunt Mabel would show delight in her own story telling after this part, smiling after the moment in which Harmon follows her directions to the point that she even

² Joyce Matula Welch, written notes for author, March 20, 2016.

³ Ibid.

had him chopping wood in the rain. Whether or not the two instances occurred on the same day is unknown, but it was also raining the day Mabel delivered my grandfather. Jewel typically had hard deliveries and was advised to not have children due to her heart condition. In my illustrations of Jewel I have incorporated a purple guinea hen as the representation of her heart. Although it was physically weak, her heart was spiritually strong. The economic state of Jewel's family left her unable to deliver her baby with a doctor or at a hospital. Mabel, a trained nurse, was there to assist in the delivery.



Figure 3- Elizabeth Welch, *Mabel*, 2017



Figure 4- Elizabeth Welch, *Jewel*, 2017

Mabel and her sister Jewel were a study of contrasts. Where Jewel was sweet and mild, Mabel was bold and unflinching. I feel a special connection to them as I feel like their

relationship mirrors the one I have with my mother. My mother has inherited many of her grandmother, Jewel's, qualities while I have inherited many of her great-aunt, Mabel's, qualities. I do not boast to have Mabel's strength, but I did inherit her straightforwardness and need to get to the point of things. My mother is a lot like Jewel in her kindness and her ability to soldier through the hardships that come her way. Just as their personalities compliment and fill in each other's missing pieces, so do mine and my mother's. Their depiction in "Mabel" and "Jewel" illustrates their relationship through the subtle positioning of their bodies. Jewel holds her flowers close to her body with her eyes closed while Mabel has an active stance with her eyes open. I decided to utilize the same color scheme and patterning for the pair. The colors of navy and cream are inverted depending on the individual. Jewel's pattern consists of cream leaves surrounded by a navy background while Mabel's pattern of navy leaves stand out amongst a sea of cream. This aesthetic decision was influenced by their relationship, for though they are unique individuals together they form two parts of one whole.



Figure 5- Elizabeth Welch, *The Birth of Duane, According to Mabel* Detail, 2016

FIBERS OF RECOLLECTION

Throughout this body of work I have aesthetically explored the folklore of my family through the representation of quilts. Quilts are vessels for memory from the moment of their inception. They provide an immediacy with personal histories through their pieced together scraps of fabric, often taken from threadbare clothing worn by loved ones during important events in life, by the skilled hands of a matriarch who then shared her skills with following generations. Photographs and letters can be saved and cherished at a gentle distance, but a quilt is a living document that can be interacted with and held close to one's person. Each carefully cut shape bears in its fibers lifetimes of memories, both shared and private. I wanted to share my family's stories in a manner that felt warm and inviting. Although the "Bennett-Matula Family Quilt" series of paintings on panel cannot be cuddled with, my intent was to create a cohesive set of images that not only referenced aesthetic qualities of quiltmaking but also a quilt's function as a record of family history. I arranged the twenty-three mixed media paintings in the shape of a quilt, with each square panel mimicking a fabric quilt square. The largest panels, located on the left and right side of the formation, depict stories in the manner of appliqued story quilts. The inner ring of smaller panels emphasize iconography from the images in the outer ring and surround a carved portrait of Rosa, Mon, Mabel, and Jewel Bennett. My placement of the family portrait in the center mimics the use of an appliqued central medallion in broderie perse quilts.⁴ To form the foundation of the series, I read letters, written documents, and had many conversations with mother and grandmother. Initially I intended to represent the four core branches of the family in Damon but as I cataloged stories for illustration I noticed I gravitated

⁴ Roderick Kiracofe, *The American Quilt: A History of Cloth and Comfort 1750-1950* (New York: Clarkson Potter, 1993), 66-67.

towards the stories told by the Bennett's and Matula's. I relied heavily on Rosa Bennett's life story and accounts from my mother of stories told by my grandfather, Duane, and my great-great aunt, Mabel. Their narratives form the outer ring of the series. The largest panels in the outer ring are divided evenly between female and male driven stories, allocating three panels to both genders. Panels half-sized panels located at the top and bottom of the formation depict visually simpler narratives from Rosa's life.



Figure 6- Elizabeth Welch, *Bennett Family Portrait*, 2016

Throughout the series I allocated a specific pattern for each individual. My use of a distinct pattern for each individual is derived from the practice of incorporating old clothing into quilts. I wanted it to be as if each patterned shape representing an individual came right off their own back. When creating the patterns I referenced reproduction fabrics from the time period in

which my family members lived. I created patterns that referenced how individual family members dressed, such as with Jewel, Mabel, and their Father, Monroe. Other patterns were created through color associations within their own family, such as the use of purple and blue in Monroe's mother, sister and father. My intention is for the viewer to easily recognize the individuals of my family as well as their relationships without the genealogical clues present in physical attributes. With this foundation, I was then able to extricate the patterns used in the story panels into other images. This first came into play when I extended the use of pattern into the smaller inner ring of panels that focus on tools used by my family members. These panels help simplify the series with their emphasis on important colors and patterns. The larger story panels on the perimeter were so packed with information I wanted to provide a resting place for the viewer's eyes as they looked towards the center of the series.

While researching my family history, I noticed a difference in the stories told by the men and women in my family. Stories told by the men tended towards a fanciful, anecdotal nature while the stories told by the women were complex and dealt with many of the harsh realities of their existence. As I worked on the panels, I felt a need to expand upon their stories in a way that would accurately describe the depth of their experiences. I found that the simplified forms I used in the "Bennett-Matula Family Quilt" worked best when I also dealt with a similarly simplified narrative. The stories concerning the women in my family were too complicated for this format. I chose to do this through the medium of carved linoleum relief prints. Within the detailed carvings I feel that I was able to perform a character study of the women, whereas in the quilt paintings I was displaying narratives in a way that allowed for a lack of specificity in identity. The manner in which I depicted Rosa Bennett in the paintings does not show how she looked but describes her spirit through the pattern I chose for her. In the fabric print of Rosa picking cotton

at night after putting her three daughters to bed, the viewer can see her form occupying her own setting.



Figure 7- Elizabeth Welch, *Rosa*, 2017

My choice to incorporate the use of relief prints also stems from its use in the origins of patterned fabrics. I did not create or print my images with blocks of wood and clay that were utilized in early fabric production, however, the fashion in which I employ linoleum directly references their use. The size of my seventeen inch square linoleum matrix is relative to the typical size used in fabric printing, as eighteen inches was the largest that could be functionally controlled.⁵ I carved the patterns I developed in my paintings into the seventeen inch squares and then printed them on fabric to frame the circular images. As previously mentioned, I created patterns for family members as if it was a swatch of fabric that came from their shirt or dress. My

⁵ Ibid., 16-17.

use of patterns throughout “Damon Hill” directly references the commercial practice of printing patterned fabric on to feed sacks that could then be used as fabric to make clothing. Many rural families from the 1920s to the 1950s, including my own, relied heavily on the fabric that encased their flour and feed.⁶ My family consisted of cotton farmers who often faced more needs than wants, and the necessary purchase of foodstuffs in patterned fabric aided their ability to make themselves new clothes. My use of a circular image printed in brown surrounded by fabric references unopened feed sacks with their original labels. Instead of it being a flour company branding their products, it is Rosa, Mabel, Jewel, Lorene, Sandra, and Joyce taking ownership of their own narrative.



Figure 8- Elizabeth Welch, *Damon Hill* Installation, 2017

⁶ Linzee Kull McCray, *Feed Sacks: A Colourful History of a Frugal Fabric* (Calgary: Uppercase Publishing Inc, 2016), 265-266.

SPOKEN TRUTH

Quilts act as symbols for many things. They act as a representation of the United States and its pieced together society of people from a multitude of backgrounds. Quilts bear the weight of family history as they are passed down from generation to generation. They record friendships through embroidered signatures and contain illustrated images of important events. Above all, quilts are symbols made by and cared for by women. Traditionally feminine handicrafts, although they can be seen as a tool of subjugation, were the main avenue of creative expression for women throughout history. Quilting and quilts were often the only creative outlet that women had available to them as well as the only possession that was truly their own. Women were denied access to large portions of society, including formal education and positions of influence. Sewing and other handicrafts were often the only areas in which women had complete access and total control of its instruction.⁷ There a few shining moments where women are included in records to have create important changes in history. Unfortunately, however, the more prevalent practice of leaving women who created things of great intellectual or aesthetic importance without credit and unacknowledged is persistent in human history. When looking through history books it is easy to believe that the lack of representation coincides with a lack of effort. At its core, history is a catalog of what society deemed important to remember. When half of society is deemed less important from their birth, lifetimes of history are left to be forgotten. A primary influence for “Damon Hill” was the Reconciliation Quilt by Lucinda Ward Honstain. Wanting to know more about Lucinda and the context of the stories she quilted, I began to look for scholarly research in regards to her quilt and possibly her life. The primary document I found concerning

⁷ Patricia Mainardi, “Quilts: The Great American Art,” *Radical America* 7, no.1 (1973): 36.

the Reconciliation Quilt had no actual knowledge of Lucinda's life in her own right. All that was available was the history of the men in her family while her connection to the images she created are left to conjecture.⁸ Lucinda's full inclusion in history is a largely unbeatable battle, as I am certain that the writer of the paper found all of the information they could. I am lucky to live in a time period where women of note are being recorded in their entirety and not as a secondary relation to their male relatives. Future societies of women will be able to look back at this time period and be able to women accomplishing important and beautiful things. I have the benefit of being able to read about women who accomplished great things one hundred years before I was born. However, as you extend further back in time the female voice becomes quieter and quieter. My great-great grandmother Rosa was only able to hear whispers of possibilities. For these women, they had their foremother's quilts to remember that they had the ability to create something of profound importance.

I looked for literary voices present during my great-great grandmother's lifetime that could help me to understand the context in which she lived. Virginia Woolf, a contemporary of Rosa despite the separation of country and class, expands upon the lack of female presence in history throughout her essay "A Room of One's Own." In chapter five the narrator examines the writing of a fictional modern day author, Mary Carmichael, in relation to great female authors of previous centuries. She noticed that Carmichael was illuminating characteristics of women that had not been previously seen. Woolf describes the lack of access and representation women experienced as writers in fiction in a way that illuminated Rosa's story:

⁸ Melissa Stewart Jurgena and Patricia Cox Crews, "The Reconciliation Quilt: Lucinda Ward Honstain's Pictorial Diary of an American Era," *Folk Art Magazine of the American Folk Art Museum*, Fall 2003, 38-47.

“There is no mark on the wall to measure the precise height of women. There are no yard measures, neatly divided into the fractions of an inch, that one can lay against the qualities of a good mother or the devotion of a daughter, or the fidelity of a sister, or the capacity of a housekeeper. Few women even now have been graded at the universities; the great trails of the professions, army and navy, trade, politics and diplomacy have hardly tested them. They even at this moment remain unclassified.”⁹

Seemingly small moments of frustration Rosa endured, such as her father’s missteps in land ownership, grew in importance and I could see her knowledge that she would have made better decisions if she had been allowed. Knowing that I had a documented account of a women’s life when her voice was deemed less important fueled my choice to illustrate her life as well the lives of other women in my family. They spoke their truths and made certain that their grandchildren would remember. I am simply performing my duty and making sure that they are remembered.

⁹ Virginia Woolf, *A Room of One’s Own* (New York: Harcourt Inc., 1929), 85.

CONCLUSION

I have never felt completely a part of the group on top of the hill, separated by my life lived the other twenty-eight days of the month, but as I have grown older I have come to understand the uniqueness of their stories in relation to place and the impact it has had on my own identity. Going to Damon in my childhood seemed more like going to another country than merely driving one hour away from home. The types of stories told differed from what was present in my daily life. Retaining and expressing the stories I have been given reinforces my connection to the women of Damon as well as our collective narrative. Their identities were forged during a time period that did not esteem the importance of their brilliance. My responsibility toward their history is twofold. As their daughter, I must retain their truths as they will only live on through my investment to giving them life to future generations. As an artist, I must continue to record the feminine narrative and endeavor to expand its presence in future histories.

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